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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000900

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BORDER ISSUES DEBATED BY TURKISH AND ARMENIAN
ACADEMICS

ISTANBUL 00000900 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL SHARON WIENER, REASONS 1.4 (b), (d)

This message is a joint Istanbul/Ankara product

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Turkish and Armenian academics came together in Istanbul and Ankara in September for coordinated conferences on the Economic and Social Consequences of Opening the Armenia-Turkey Border. The conferences, supported by the Eurasia Foundation with funding from USAID, were a follow-up to a January 2007 conference in Yerevan on the same topic. While the focus of the discussions was supposed to be on the economic benefits of opening the border -- something all the invited panelists actually supported -- both sides found it difficult to avoid descending into heated political debates. Participants recognized the significance of having a free and open debate in Turkey on Turkish-Armenian relations. The program was particularly significant for the Armenian participants visiting Ankara for the first time, and both sides often invoked their shared identities, even as they argued about almost everything else.
END SUMMARY.

THE ISTANBUL CONFERENCE

12. (SBU) The Armenia International Policy Research Group (AIPRG) and the ARI Movement, an independent organization that encourages young professionals to find solutions to challenges facing Turkey, organized the September 18 conference in Istanbul. ARI acted as part-time moderator, part-time agitator. AIPRG's Tigran Mkrtchyan and Mher Baghramyan, and Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, of the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, presented research papers focusing on the economic benefits of opening the border, notably the benefits that shortened trade-routes would bring. One paper claimed that for every 10% reduction in distance, a 15.6% increase in Turkish imports to Armenia would follow.

13. (SBU) The Turkish academics in attendance (many from Bilgi University -- the hosting institution -- and the ARI Movement) sat quietly through the statistics barrage. However, Turkish participants reacted when the Armenian panelists suggested that the business/NGO community had to develop before progress could be made on "peripheral" political issues (i.e., Nagorno-Karabakh and historical commissions). The Turks (including the ARI moderator) refused to separate economic issues from the political. A question posed during the discussion period aptly summarizes the Turks' position with regards to the Armenians' "open-the-border-now-talk-later" proposal: "How are we to lobby for normalization of trade-routes or relations with a

country that is actively attempting to damage our reputation abroad?" And, "What are we supposed to say to our Azeri brothers?" As a result, the conference devolved into heated commentary.

THE ANKARA CONFERENCE

14. (SBU) Turkish academics Sedat Laciner (International Strategic Research Organization) and Burcu Gultekin Punsman (Middle Eastern Technical University) joined their Armenian counterparts in presenting at the September 20 Ankara round-table, organized by the Turkish Armenian Business Development Committee (TABDC) and AIPRG, and hosted by the Turkish Democracy Foundation. As in Istanbul, the Armenian panelists claimed that open borders would usher in economic benefits to both Armenia and Turkey (citing, for example, strong and growing Turkey-Georgia trade ties). Panelists stressed that trade is already taking place between Turkey and Armenia, through Georgia, and that Turkey actually constitutes one of Armenia's largest trading partners. Even as they emphasized the economic benefits, the Armenian panelists made sure to stress that Armenia's economic development continued absent significant Turkish trade and investment: i.e., Armenia doesn't need Turkey any more than Turkey needs Armenia. The Turks, again focused on the political. For them, an enhanced role in the Caucasus and diminishing pressure on genocide recognition are the key motivators for opening the border and normalizing relations. The economic benefits of trade with such a small nation, they argued, are simply too small to alone justify this significant political step. Despite differing objectives and rationale, and despite the tendency on both sides to become overly defensive, the participants managed to maintain a constructive dialogue (thanks, in large part, to professional and impartial moderation by TABDC).

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FRUSTRATION WITH THE DIASPORA

15. (C) COMMENT: Beneath the Armenians, advocacy for opening borders before addressing "peripheral" political questions, was an underlying frustration on the part of the Armenians with the Armenian Diaspora, and with the inability of Turks to distinguish between the policies of Yerevan and the Diaspora's agenda. Armenian participants, more than once, had to clarify, for example, that the government of Armenia does not oppose Turkey's EU accession. Commenting on the Diaspora's lobbying in Washington, AIPRG's Mkrtchyan said, "...this would not be the first time organizations abroad have damaged Armenian relations at home." Despite these frustrations and the resulting tendency to talk around each other more than to each other, the conferences revealed -- among Turkish and Armenian academics -- a desire to at least discuss unsticking the Armenian-Turkish relationship, even while demonstrating how difficult it is to disaggregate border issues from the normalization of political relations.

END COMMENT

WIENER